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P. Roche, John P.
CIA 101 Turner, Adm.

John P. Roche Worrying about SALT and the Russians

The other night I tuned in a meeting sponsored by the SALT-sellers, the White House-inspired coalition that is out beating the bushes in behalf of the arms limitation treaty that Presidents Carter and Brezhnev will unveil in Vienna.

The sponsors, all honorable persons, were not interested in trivia such as missile throw-weight, killer satellites or the relationship between NATO's "tactical" problems and strategic issues. Their pitch was simple: Only bad people who want war would oppose SALT.

After this moving homily there was supposed to be "community participation," but the first bird who grabbed a floor mike got off a 10-minute denunciation of the "Rockefeller conspiracy"; the second excoriated the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission — and I turned off the radio. Out of pride of craftsmanship I was tempted to call Anne Wexler at the White House and tell her the chairman of any such meeting should be able to kill floor mikes from the podium. You just flip a little switch.

What distressed me about this exercise was neither the lack of professionalism nor the suggestion that most of my best friends are war-lovers. Rather, it was the unarticulated premise that the American people are illiterate jackasses. If, for example, some professional flag-waver said that as early as 1962 the Soviet Union initiated a "policy of building forces for preemptive attack against U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles," you might write it off as the ravings of a Bolshie-basher.

Unfortunately for the SALT-sellers, this precise formulation was used by the only secretary of defense we have, Harold Brown, in a commencement address at Annapolis. Brown went on to confirm the position of the Committee on the Present Danger that we have not been in an "arms-race"

with the USSR — they have been doing all the running. Indeed, if he will accept, I'll be glad to give my slot on the board of the committee to Secretary Brown. He, Gene Rostow and Paul Nitze would make quite a troika.

On another SALT issue, who are the American people to believe on the vital question of verification? Of making sure, to make two cases in point, that the Soviets do not strap a third stage on the "tactical" SS-20 mobile missile and make it a mobile SS-16 ICBM? Or that they don't put their "Dog House" and "Cat House" (no joke) phased-array radar systems in an anti-ballistic missile configuration? The answer to this is easy: Our spy satellites would pick it up.

That is, if they are not blinded by a killer-satellite (ASAT) with some fancy gadgetry. We know they have an operational ASAT capability. "Yes, but they will promise not to use it, and we don't have to launch an arms-race in ASATs." Thanks a lot, but we dropped our ASAT program in the early 1960s, in part because we didn't want to launch an arms race in space; they kept right on going. "Roche, you worry too much. We'll have a special treaty on ASATs, and Moscow has been very forthcoming."

Until last week when, because they figured President Carter had painted himself into a corner and could hardly jump out and join the "war-mongers," the ASAT negotiations were torpedoed by a preposterous demand that we abandon the space-shuttle. In short, they have pulled the same stunt employed in negotiations on mutual troop reductions (MEFR) in Europe: whenever they want something from us — say, President Ford's signature on the Helsinki Accord — they become temporarily charming, cooperative, and "forthcoming."

Ford's signature, however, was hardly dry before MBFR was back in dry ice where the talks remain to this day. The ASAT negotiations could easily go on to the year 1999, with sudden "forthcoming" noises from Moscow only when we discuss deploying ASATs of our own. Meanwhile, their killers are operational, and doubtless being refined on the basis of our super-secret satellite operational manuals the KGB recently procured.

Leaving science non-fiction, what about our ability to verify their tests now that the Iranian listening posts are CIA surplus? Again, if the American people were

informed by Joe Schmoe that we are in deep trouble, the response would be a yawn. But Joe wasn't the source: it was Stan Turner, the only director of Central Intelligence in town.

The White House was cross with Admiral Turner, suggesting he was distracted when he talked to the Senate. After all, we can fly U-2s out of Cyprus: at 90,000 feet they will follow the dotted line to stay wholly within Turkey. A fast improvisation, but tricky: our Turkish allies want Moscow's OK! Don't stand on one foot waiting; get out there and denounce Bad People Who Want War.